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ABSTRACT

Major areas of inquiry found in this paper pertain to: (1) the current status of critical thinking in curriculums; (2) critical thinking as working with knowledge that is open to question and creative response; (3) descriptions of situations where critical thinking is enacted through classroom discourse techniques; (4) the need to wean students from roles as passive notetakers ("little stenographers"); and (5) descriptions of cooperating teachers as critical inquiry mentors of student teachers. The power of authentic discourse in classrooms is centrally advanced with reference to the practice of "suppositional teaching." Through such teaching, knowledge can be viewed as belonging to participants in group dialogue instead of to sources of established or taken-for-granted authoritativeness. The paper concludes with an invitation to consider why critical thinking in clasrooms is still in very much of an "at-risk condition." Specific and unfortunate conditions that still prevent critical thinking efforts in classrooms are suggested. It is suggested that good cheer about critical thinking advances in recent years may be delusional. (Author/IAH)

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CRITICAL INQUIRIES, UNCERTAINTIES

AND NOT FAKING IT WITH STUDENTS

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Presented at the Annual Conference of The Center for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique, Sonoma State U., Rohnert Park, CA, 8-4-91

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PAPER ABSTRACT

TO: Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

RE: Submission of professional paper titled, "Critical Inquiry, Uncertainties, and Not Faking It With Students."

The paper was recently presented at the Annual Conference of The Center for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique, Sonoma State University, Rhonert Park, California, August 4, 1991.

Major areas of inquiry pertain to: 1) The current status of critical thinking in curriculums, 2) Critical thinking as working with knowledge that is open to question and creative response, 3) Descriptions of situations where critical thinking is enacted through classroom discourse techniques, 4) The need to wean students from roles as passive notetakers ("little stenographers"), 5) Descriptions of cooperating teachers a critical inquiry mentors of student teachers.

The power of authentic discourse in classrooms is centrally advanced with reference to the practice of "suppositional teaching" (Milner, 1991). Through such teaching, knowledge can be viewed as belonging to group dialogue participants instead of to sources of established or taken-for-granted authoritativeness.

The paper concludes with author invitation to consider why critical thinking in classrooms is still in very much of an "at risk condition." Specific and unfortunate conditions that still prevent critical thinking efforts in classrooms are suggested. The possibility that efforts and good cheer about critical thinking advances in recent years may be delusional is suggested.

CRITICAL INQUIRIES, UNCERTAINTIES, AND NOT FAKING IT WITH STUDENTS

Doubts and Objectives:

The theme of this conference, "Teaching Students Intellectual Standards They Can Use to Reason Persuasively, Master Content, and Discipline Their Minds" is one that impresses and intrigues. It is an explicit and confident call to planning and action. So why does it make me uncomfortable? Am I ambivalent about being able to advance the theme, by paper and discussion? Perhaps I quaver at the theme's challenges. They elude educators like pond minnows, a toddler, like humming birds, an arthritic golden-ager.

Do I cavil at a theme that seems beyond the possible? But how can that be if my presence at this conference is honest? I must believe that we are here to further actualize those concepts among educators of communities and nations. Perhaps my anxiety is that the theme is so direct and unflinching. Part of my nature is to be uncertain, Yet there are views and techniques I rely on with reasonable confidence. In that spirit of security, let me summarize this effort as intending to:

1) recommend states of "knowledge uncertainty."
2) argue that good thinking is not acquired "on the cheap."
3) question the status of thinking in our curriculums.
4) recommend group discourse.
5) describe an unanticipated personal conversion.
6) recommend "open knowledge territory."

7) argue for fact integration into higher level thought.

8) describe personal endeavors for advancing my ideals.

9) describe a view of one's "...mind being in charge."

10) exhort against "classroom stenography."

11) recommend "suppositional teaching."

12) suggest our current status as that of medieval beggars holding tin cups and waiting for the Renaissance.

About Myself:

I would be less than honest trying to portray certainty about the content of this paper. Being uncertain may have advantages. It spares us rigors of having to defend positions, argue with friends, or act courageously. My ideas may be closer to a compendium of confusions and introspections, with a few convictions scattered in the debris. If I begin sounding certain about many things it's unintended, though an armchair Freudian may suggest that certainties are exactly what I value. But at the conscious level, I suspect that personal certainties sparkle more like Tinkerbell dust than diamonds of logic.

I will claim to value some ideas and techniques, but I'm negotiable. I think I am an effective teacher educator and to be that requires some thinking competence. Hopefully I practice it in college courses, as a supervisor of student teachers, a creator of professional growth seminars for cooperating teachers, and six year director of a thinking enrichment program for multicultural middle school youth at St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wisconsin.

The Current Status of Critical Thinking:

I am also a book review critic for the "Arts/Entertainment" Sunday Section of **The Milwaukee Journal**. That work is an avocation, but I'm proud of it and hope it's done well. In the Spring of 1990 I reviewed a novel by Peter Straub, titled, "Mystery." In the review I wrote:

> "The fact that truth is not acquired on the cheap must be comprehended by great philosophers and detectives. Young Pasmore and aging Von Heilitz are smart and brave, yet made of blood and bone. They can't see or anticipate every hazard as they move through dim sectors where anyone can be bought or killed" (Hauser, 1990). [1]

Nor can good thinking be had on the cheap and that goes for efforts to help others toward it. I'm confident I stimulate good thinking better than years ago. But improvement has been slow and arduous. I also believe that the critical thinking movement in global education is on the edge of permanence, but that won't come on the cheap either.

David Perkins, during an interview with Ron Brandt of **Educational Leadership**, said that he hoped the critical thinking movement had become "a fruitful fad." Some fads come and go. Maybe you can think of a few like that. But maybe our interest in the heart of thinking and its applications will become like ecology. "A few years ago it was a fad, but now it's part of the culture." Then Perkins describes the peril of the movement not

hitting "...a critical mass of interest and application among educators within the next five years." If it's not recognized by that time as a very necessary thing to do, "...it's likely to blow over, and we will be back where we were a decade ago (Perkins, 1986). [2]

It's 1991. What do you think? Is the critical thinking movement extending beyond our own voices and actions? How firmly planted are the critical thinking energies among college, high school, middle, and elementary classroom teachers at large? Are we advancing confidently...tentatively..or at all? Are the necessary beliefs, goals, and consequential curriculum actions out there being funded and modeled? Are better habits of thought and discourse being modeled for increasingly large populations of youth?

Certain Doubts and Obstacles:

We should stay tough with ourselves about whether youth in schools are becoming more effective thinkers. We shouldn't stop debating it. Are we to making substantial progress in our school curriculums toward increasing student powers of observation, inquiry, logical reasoning, and abilities to make critical discrimination ...or are we falling short of such gains? those

Perhaps such evaluations are assisted by Paul (1984) in his writing about possible first steps to sustain the positive energies. Teachers should emphasize respect for conclusions based on evidence rather than authority.

"Wherever possible, students should be given every

> opportunity to advance ideas of their own and to give reasons to support them, as well as opportunities to hear the objections of other students. If this is done carefully in an atmosphere of cooperation and while learning critical analytic terms, students will begin to use critical distinctions when defending their ideas" (Paul, 1984). [3]

Paul (1984) described certain "obstacles" to a critical thinking renewal in our schools. They have sources in homes, communities, and schools.

1) Our recognition of problems is oversimplified into visions of good versus evil where approved orthodoxies and patriotisms are persuasively taught to citizens while opposing views and histories are represented as inferior. That people from other nations and cultures might represent an advanced or mature position, is not conveyed to persons in or beyond school as very possible. We are too xenophobic. [4]

2) We falter in the teaching and practice of dialectical reasoning where mental energies move flexibly between opposing points of view. With dialectic, efforts are made to find strong support for both sides of a question. Such reasoning should be critical, cooperative and creative. In a messy real world, where so many serious problems are social, affective, and moral, reliance on predetermined models and manuals is not possible. Yet we throw precious thinking energies and funding resources toward such technical resources as if it were. [5]

3) Children are raised to value the authority of what adults think instead of "...coming to value the authority of their own reasoning capacities" (Paul, 1984). Parents and teachers need to foster stronger child and adolescent inquiry habits even though persistent questions will be raised and comfortable perceptions threatened. [6]

Perhaps an appropriate response to Perkin's comment about where we are with critical thinking might reside in the question of why our youth in school now read, write, speak, listen, and reason. If they do it only for credentials and adult approval, hasn't what we have spoken of and tried in recent years been dishonest? If they also do it to discover and create ideas, perhaps our critical thinking visions and actions should be continued and even reinforced (Paul, 1984, p. 13). [7]

If the movement is stumbling or has halted, all is not lost. Great movements may surge and falter in ongoing cycles. Is that happening with critical thinking curriculums in schools and classrooms?

An Unanticipated Personal Conversion:

The movement is still occurring in my own ideals, though I'm less confident about how well I cross from ideals to competent actions. I used to fake it with students and part of me knew that was occurring. I worked very hard to practice concept authority and lecture fluency. Looking good up there in front of the class was an essential goal and I usually succeeded. Students verified that on evaluations of my teaching. They wrote

that my goals were clear, assignments direct, tests reasonable, and grades fair. I had arrived at the comfortable plateau of professional teaching success, thank you, and would still be there, except for a modest conversion experience.

It occurred at a faculty workshop where a student panel presented impressions of faculty teaching success and failure. We witnessed a polite and honest group of young adults suggesting how their teachers could improve. They said we needed to generate more honest and sustained thinking and dialogue among students. They asked for better assignments, better testing, better discourse, and more open attitudes toward student interests. At first I was amused by such student greed. They wanted so much. But when a student suggested that professors can be closed because they know so much or by the perception of themselves as authorities, I put the smirk away and began to think with those student mentors.

I still respect their perceptions and have distilled them further. The resultant actions have taken me into less confident but more honest territory. I value the belief that critical inquiry and honest discourse require idea exchanges among persons who consider their knowledge and values as open to change - never closed or completed. I try to keep moving into open-knowledge territory, away from being the expert and having all the answers. Authoritative mansions can be comfortable but I'm seeking the adventure of uncertainties and that can be a risky endeavor.

I still fight the urge to indulge in monologues and bask in the illusion that students are quiet because they're adoring me. Even when I catch myself and try for more student dialogue, my smug and partly unconverted ego tends to whine, I'm the expert! But I don't believe that cranky old peddler anymore.

Professionals speak of various tactics to help us liberate thoughtful and spontaneous student voices. But does that very research, meant to assist us in classroom discourse, represent an unintended parody of why we fail? Perhaps we need to practice discourse more and read less about how to do it. Or maybe we need to check our assumptions of what genuine critical inquiry is about.

When I reflect on inquiry, the ideas of partnership, affirmation, and trust occur. Through critical inquiry, I should be able to affirm or challenge concepts without fear of appearing foolish or insubordinate. That process of needing and caring enough to respond is hard work, but dare we avoid it and allow our students to? Oh, yes, we can ask them to memorize. There is even merit in that process. but the real exertions of intellect involve students and ourselves toiling with content that is open and evolving; the kind that transcends and subsumes taxonomies and lexicons.

Two Teaching Incidents:

In my months and years of conversion to open-knowledge territory, it occasionally occurs not to assume that students are pristine creatures who thirst for high level thought and

discourse opportunities. An account of student apathy is ably described by Costa(1985) when he refers to a group of high school students trying to deal with a teacher's question about the Frost poem, "Stopping by the woods on a Snowy Evening." The teacher is trying to generate thought and discussion about why the final line, "And miles to go before I sleep," is repeated. The students do not leap into animated responses. The teacher tries to prompt and coax them into commentaries, but they resist...and resist..until one of them finally says, "Why don't you just tell us the answer?" [8]

In the film, Godfather II, the young godfather, played by Al Pacino, says: If there's anything that we should learn from the 20th century, it's that anyone can be killed. Forgive that reference, especially if you disliked the Godfather films, but there is a connection for me. In my reading and effort to elevate student thinking and discourse in classrooms, if there's anything I should be learning, it's that excellent thought and discourse can be killed by too much reliance on textbook certainties and teacher authority. Youth will not be forced into thinking because credentialized know-it-alls prefer it that way.

Jerome Bruner, in Actual Minds, Possible Worlds, praises those teachers in his youth who did not treat knowledge as fact and concept certainty. Bruner fondly reminisces about teachers who taught as if knowledge was an open reality. With those teachers, one might almost begin to think that knowledge can be created. [9]

Recently I observed a student teacher with a group of 4th graders. She asked the group how long ago dinosaurs lived. An eager child responded that they lived on earth from one hundred and thirty-five to forty-five million years ago. The student teacher, to my chagrin, was content with that confident response and continued with her rapid-fire quizzing. During a later conference, we discussed the limitations of that approach. She perceived my disappointment and tried to rescue herself with a quick reference to how she would try to "...use the taxonomy better next time." But she couldn't elaborate on that resolve. I asked her if she really tried to think about how long ninety million years is. What does it mean for a species to survive on the planet for ninety-five million years? Is that an astonishing accomplishment? Why? Will human beings as a species survive on earth for ninety million years? Why or why not? So our dialogue was enriched because what had been treated as a fact became transformed into thought provoking content.

In pondering this incident, the student teacher's promise to "use the taxonomy better next time" might be amusing except for another implication that I later realized. What we try to convey to students in teacher preparation through reference to organized models didn't manifest itself in that moment of truth. Didn't we teach it well to her? Was she inattentive during those various times in various college courses when the taxonomy was presented and analyzed? The cognitive and affective potentials represented in Bloom's Taxonomy have been in academic journals from thirty-

five years and very available since 1974 in the David McKay Company publication. But how influential are those taxonomy classifications in the discourse planning and actions of teachers from primary grades through college?

Consider a second example, one also observed in person. A teacher of fifth graders, during a lesson on extinct species, asked the class what it would mean if wild rhinos vanished. One child, possibly very smart about remembered facts, answered that there would still be rhinos "...in zoos and even in places down in Florida." The teacher said, "But those wouldn't be wild rhinos." A chorus of students responded, "But they are rhinos anyway!" The teacher pursued the distinction between wild rhinos and captured ones. She wanted the students to think beyond appearances and assumptions. This master teacher believed that fifth graders needed to think about the meaning and feel sadness about animals on our planet becoming "endangered species." Is it okay for wild rhinos to become extinct as long as we have transplanted ones in zoos or "...down in Florida?" Are wild rhinos worth the concern of children? Do children and adults think of real rhinos beyond the shallow awareness of their presence in zoos or as cartoon-like creatures on television or in the Magic Kingdom?

Reflective Cooperating Teachers:

Teachers like the above are the kind I want student teachers planning and practicing with. I am convinced that student teachers need to be with experienced teachers who are reflective

and successful at teaching those qualities to students.

In 1989 I began a series of on-campus professional growth seminars for cooperating teachers interested in professional reflection. For two years I've recruited ten or twelve cooperating teachers and each semester gathered them for six two-hour discourse sessions. The goal was to boost our caring and careful thinking about effective student teacher supervision. Their assignment was to journal their reflections about effective student teacher guidance and reveal them at the seminar sessions. Concepts to guide their journaling and seminar discourse included student teacher readiness, competence, confidence, challenges and difficulties, professional maturation, and evaluation.

The professional growth seminars have been recently recommended by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction as an alternative to more traditional and obligatory credit courses for cooperating teachers. The professional growth seminars have the advantage of being focused essentially on student teacher guidance and are reserved to *maximum enrollments of twelve participants with student teachers presently assigned to them.* [10] A grant to continue those seminars has been recently received from the Carol and Bob Heideman foundation affiliated with the Wisconsin Association of Teacher Educators.

Faking It Without Knowing It:

The phenomena of thinking we are planners and practitioners of discourse without actually doing it may inflict itself on too many classrooms. Consider the account of an English teacher by

authors of **The Shopping Mall School.**

In an interview after the observation of her class, this teacher referred to the class discussion, but in fact produced an eight point lecture. She began the class by asking for main points in Bacon's essay, "Of Love," then pushed on by adding that she had extracted some herself and wanted to make sure the class had them. Dictation commenced with the reading of her notes succinctly seasoned with repetitions of crucial concepts while the seniors performed verbatim writing.

> "One. Drama on the stage often depicts love in both comedy and tragedy. Two. But love in real life creates many problems. Three. Great men do not allow themselves to succumb to the mad degree of love" and so on through the eight points. But students began to interject, "Wait, Wait" and "Say it again!" as they frantically scribbled her exact language. When it ended there was no discussion." (Powell, Farrar, Cohen, 1985, p. 71) [11]

During the subsequent interview, she said, "Everyone is held responsible to the major ideas in that particular essay because we have discussed it." The researchers could only interpret the eight point lecture as her interpretation of a discussion. And what about honest student engagement with the essay? "She told the researchers that the students could read the essay if they wanted to but that it wasn't necessary. [12]

The researchers further comment that this English teacher's

class was viewed as "tough" and that the students were very capable, but what the students never started to think about was Bacon's essay. Their energies were focused on and used up by less consequential school labor concerns like, get the notes right and find out what the test will cover.

Anyone can kill thinking and discourse and not know it or mean to do it. A very large and respected study of high school history teachers in a sunbelt state described the teaching as "...routinely reducing issues to lists of facts, names, places, events, laws, and the like" (McNeil, 1988). [13] The teachers demanded the copying of dictated material into notebooks by students, then moved on to the next content without dialogue. In subsequent interviews with researchers, the teachers discussed their content knowledgeably. Perhaps they perceived the adult visitors as capable, but failed to attribute that quality to students.

McNeil hypothesizes the condition of many teachers as being noninfluential in their students' thinking lives. Students do think and dialogue, but not in classrooms. They form opinions and convictions in dialogue with peers and less educated adults in neighborhoods and at part-time jobs where facts and ideas are discussed, though almost assuredly without the spirit of care and objectivity that excellent teachers should be able to encourage.

But My Content Isn't Discourse Friendly:

I've encountered that response among campus colleagues and from teachers at workshops. It may be offered in a respectful or

even hail-fellow-well-met manner, but with the implicit proviso that certain content-my content-doesn't accommodate itself to interpersonal techniques. I suspect that all of us will tend to quarantine certain content from discourse efforts. Well meant excuses are offered. This is new material... This is abstract material... This is confusing material... So go the excuses.

But a faculty colleague offered an interesting contrast in a recently written paper. She wrote that the accounting and statistics she taught might not lend themselves well to group discussion, but then added, "However I do feel it is important that students be actively engaged in learning during the class." (Schoenebeck, 1989). [14] In pondering that positive response, the real nature of it finally occurred. She was resolving that her content, which might seem to favor lecture and recitation, would not dictate that direction.

In recent workshops, I've tried to convince skeptical teachers that the decision to initiate discourse is more attitudinal than content determined. This conviction was further advanced when I came upon the novel title, DREAM SCIENCE, written by Thomas Palmer. In it, one of the characters says, "The thing to remember is that your mind is in charge now. It dictates. Any life you can imagine is the life you can live" (Palmer, 1990). [15]

Knowing this doesn't provide the genie. Attitudes die hard. When a colleague declares that certain content is discourse proof, I know I'm again in the ring with a big mean heavyweight,

yet I don't feel helpless. At least one can make an intelligent response... If you can't see that what you teach might be discourse friendly, then how can I encourage and help you? Can I convince you that such an attitude is your loss? I know others who teach your content well and accommodate discourse while doing it. The thing to remember is that your mind is in charge now...

Student Stenographers:

A colleague and I created a study of discourse convictions and practices on our own campus during the Fall of 1988. The faculty participants, representing several content areas, agreed to devote special efforts, scrutiny, and reflection to their efforts to create high quality discourse in various courses for a six week period. They produced papers describing their introspections and conclusions. One of them produced a paper titled, "Lay that Pencil Down or Stop Me Before I Note Again" Smith, 1988). [16]

She began with reference to a Doonesbury episode where someone says, "It seems as though we are turning out stenographers rather than critical thinkers." At the conclusion of her paper, my colleague describes her efforts as having taken the pencils out of the hands of her students "...with mixed results.' She confesses that it wasn't easy, but resolves to continue experimenting with discourse inspirations. "Surely the alternative, a generation of stenographers, makes the effort worthwhile" (Smith, 1988). [17]

I've been at middle, high school, and college teaching for

twenty-three years and one of my convictions is that students can learn responses and demonstrate certain kinds of mastery on tests without ever thinking about those responses or the consumed knowledge.

> "We are experts at giving people information. We have been doing it for years. It is the thing we know how to do best. Helping students discover the personal meaning of information is a very different matter and the source of most of our failures. The dropout, for example, is not a dropout because we didn't tell him or her. We did that over and over" (Combs, 1981). [18]

Don't sanctify students, but give credit to their innate potential for participating in discourse. Because many of us maintain a shared legacy - the belief that students are usually incapable of thoughtful classroom dialogue - it requires great pedagogical courage and effort to move toward a dialogic process.

Hard Work and Critical Thinking:

In 1986, I created a summer workshop for minority middle school youth intended to start them thinking about college as a future possibility. The language arts, science, and physical education classes they took daily for four weeks, were and are meant to stimulate critical thinking and effective cooperative actions among the youth. We've traveled through six programs to the present and seen some astonishing developments, including:

1) growth from an emphasis on only Native American youth to recent enrollments of Afro, Asian, and Hispanic youth as well.

2) growth from 28 participants in 1986 to 60 in 1991.

3) curriculum content permutations that have included chemistry magic shows, student performed musical productions, experiments with magnetism and electricity, and dissections of fetal pigs.

4) a recently expanded program curriculum in 1991 that included science explorations, international sports, adventures in computing, and a language arts and social studies fusion course.

5) a faculty colleague, planning and teaching language arts/social studies content by focusing on the World War II Holocaust tragedy through use of the book Night, by Ellie Weisel. In a recent newspaper article about our program goals, my colleague was quoted:

> "In this class, we are using this historical framework (the Holocaust) to try to answer philosophical questions such as what is the nature of justice and human rights" (Rutter, 1991). [19]

He and his co-teacher were very successful with their 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students and his printed words are revealing, but what intrigues me more are his thoughts expressed during the program's first days when he indicated that the content seemed very difficult for the students, perhaps beyond their readiness. As the program concluded, he indicated that many of the students had made substantial advances in thinking and discourse habits.

He also explained how much hard work and time the daily planning consumed and it occurred to me that teaching youth to think critically is hard and time consuming work. Such a conclusion may seem self-evident and probably shouldn't take space in a conference paper, but I allude to it as a conviction about planning for and teaching critical thinking skills to youth. *It is very hard work.*

In our study of college classroom discourse, a colleague described his encouragements of student discussion as "very serious events" (Connor, 1988). [20] In convincing students to present panels and role-play episodes, he recommends rehearsals prior to the demonstrations. It means extra time and hard work for colleague and students. He writes:

> "The panel presentation is an ambitious project needing careful supervision. I normally have students submit a drafted outline well in advance. Together we work out a suitable approach. I sometimes give the students opportunity to do a dress rehearsal in my office. Generally speaking, I provide whatever assistance I feel is necessary" (Connor, 1988). [21]

Consider the various expressions indicating how this short account suggests needed teacher time and effort: "...an ambitious project needing careful supervision..." or "...students submit a carefully drafted outline in advance..." or "Together we work out a suitable approach." or "...a dress rehearsal in my office." or "I provide whatever assistance I feel is necessary." These

comments weren't written to express a teacher's work ethic convictions, yet they seem to do just that. Also notable is how strong the bonds of teacher and student colleagueship may be if such teaching exertions occur.

Excellent student thinking and classroom discourse do not occur accidently. Suitable issues and topics need careful selection and planning. Various challenging questions need extra considerations. Teachers may require students to submit composed questions in advance. Teacher assessments of student thinking may require essay testing for all students. When those examinations are read and scored, whose time and effort are required? These ideas are not about finding time and labor reprieves for teachers. Higher level thinking in classrooms doesn't come "...on the cheap."

Challenging Certainties With Suppositional Teaching:

Occasionally, with a class, I carry on arguments with myself, challenging an article or textbook view that might seem unassailable. I take a position, achieve student affirmation of it, then reverse myself. What's happening to him, students may wonder. I've been pleasantly surprised at how I can increase my powers of observation and inquiry by turning certainties into questions. Students catch on and try it themselves.

For example, I may insist that a teacher must learn to value and protect confidential student expressions. A teacher must be trustworthy and reliable to earn and maintain student respect. Oh, yes, I can sense the warm affirmatives of the teacher

education students. Isn't he wise. Oh, yes. A few may recall examples of teachers being trustworthy to further support the position. They want to please me. Then I try to challenge the secure position. What if a student expresses a confidential fact or belief that threatens themselves or someone else? Shouldn't teachers think of other persons besides the confidential communicator? Should a teacher ever unconditionally promise confidentiality to a student?

Or how about the lament that our schools are graduating students who don't know how to think. How can any school or system justify its existence when many of its students fail to learn critical thinking skills and appreciations? I can sense the mental applause from uncritical students. Then I throw a fork ball. "But wait! Our schools are doing exactly what we should desire. Many youth are leaving our schools without knowing how to think because they are incapable of it. Our schools are identifying the best and brightest and those who aren't, simply sort themselves away from the elites..." I press on with a split-fingered curve. "In fact we need more dropouts to prove that we adhere to high standards..."

If we can locate those concepts that are arguable, or make them appear arguable and encourage students to try the same, we will expand potentials for inquiry exercise and the kind of discourse where "...teacher and students discuss what they don't know" (Dillon, 1984). [22]

I propose an epistemology and teaching style that

"...renders the world less fixed and more susceptible to recreation"(Bruner, 1986). [23] I can't completely reject the sad perception of students as mostly knowledge deficient. Too much of that smug clothing still feels good. But might I begin moving toward a "suppositional style" of discourse (Milner, 1991) [24] where educated guessing, supposing, and inferring start to become course companions? Let me expand that fragile premise. For example:

- In classroom discourse, I could use words like "perhaps," "maybe," "then again," "might," and "probably."
- I could refrain from offering crystalized definitions and interpretations of academic and contemporary issues, conveying to the students that my viewpoints are sincere but open to facts, convictions, and deductions from other sources.
- I could invite students to question my propositions or challenge authoritative knowledge from public figures or in textbooks.
- I could even disinhibit students into making risky, whimsical, and hypothetical statements. "Say something funny but true...silly, but maybe not..."
- I could sometimes shock my students when they offer wise commentaries-and they do-by saying something like, "I think you're convincing me." Of course, two minutes later, I could declare being unconvinced, give reasons, and keep the discourse brewing.

There are times when I've wanted to do all of the above.

Now I can. I call it growing more "suppositional."

My Discourse Conscience:

Can I convince you that being in a state of certainty may gravely wound critical inquiry and honest discourse? I believe that certainties and expertness turn students into listless notetakers. I'm nagged by a discourse conscience that jumps around like an imp in my head whispering, *"Let it come from the students... Find the question, the pause, the cue that will make it come from the students!"* We don't stake out important idea territory by jotting frantic notes or drawing in textbooks with colored markers. Inquiry and honest discourse in classrooms is a virtue because speaking ideas, listening to others, and judging such messages informs our social and artistic intelligence.

Could it be that all of us are paying too much attention to the rules of our content? Did Van Gogh paint with the intention of following the *rules* of expressionism? [25] In describing the process of scientific discovery, Crick writes:

> "What then do Jim Watson and I deserve credit for? If we deserve any credit at all, it is for persistence and the willingness to discard ideas when they became untenable... We could not at all see what the answer was, but we considered it so important that we were determined to think about it long and hard, from any relevant point of view" (Crick, 1988). [26]

As educators, concerned with the thinking, inquiry, and discourse abilities of our students, can we actively search for

the questions and dilemmas in our content areas? What an interesting series of faculty colloquiums such mutual searches might stimulate. What are the open questions in various disciplines like English, biology, sociology, history, physics, music, economics, education, and all of the others?

Can we kick the old habits of pitching closed knowledge to students? Can we begin to forge personal questions and visions about the substance of our content and can we deal students into that artistic process? For those of us, unaccustomed to such labor, it may appear difficult. But do it we must for the honest and mutual listening, thinking, and speaking with students that we desire.

And Not Faking It With Students:

Perhaps the risk of dealing with uncertainties makes us nervous. How will such free-for-all dialogue turn out? We should not know in advance and that requires courage. I recommend the kind of teacher who would agree with Dewey.

> "If we once start thinking, no one can guarantee where we shall come out, except that many objects, ends, and institutions are doomed. Every thinker puts some portion of an apparently stable world in peril, and no one can wholly predict what will emerge in its place. [27]

I recommend that teachers and students top looking for certainties in safe and orderly places. Set aside the taxonomies, programs, manuals, designs, matrices, and other

properties from the land of "educationeese" and start turning over some new stones. We need to scrutinize the way we test, separate, integrate, group, assign, employ, promote, dismiss, maintain, purchase, update, renew, supplement, and more. It won't be comfortable. Waking up often isn't.

I'm reminded of a certain character in a novel I'll be reviewing in the near future. His name is Fitzduane and in a moment of meditation it occurs to him "...that if you're the kind of person who turns over stones-and most people learn not to early in life-what comes crawling out can be disconcerting." [28] Where are the stones in our content and convictions about thinking in classrooms that we need to find and look under?

Of course we could cheat. We could select topics of which we are certain and only pretend they are open and arguable. But I suspect in doing that we often trap ourselves like children, wiping frosting from fingers and forgetting cheeks, nose, and ears. Authority and gooey certainties are smeared all over us.

What are we forgetting? What are we faking? Are we failing to comprehend the relentless nature of our task? How should we educators mentally represent the great challenge of schooling youth toward rational and affective excellence? Do we presently have the necessary concepts to meaningfully advance our students? With our conferences, workshops, consortiums, think tanks, journals, and books, one would like to affirm that. And if we have the conceptual foundations, have we generated the necessary and powerful procedures to energize our thinking curriculums?

Portions of this paper assume our fund of solid critical thinking concepts and a powerful array of procedures. But the paper also, by implication and direct reference, describes our struggles, futilities, and falling short of goals. *Are we less effective because we stay mired in conditions of:*

- failing to teach students intellectual standards, though we should know how...
- students not reading and thinking like we wish they would, though they're with us for thousands of hours each year.
- not creating classrooms with more inquiry and discourse though we should know how...
- primary, elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers floundering at modeling high quality thinking when those same persons have come through our teacher education programs and sat in our seminars...?

But what if our theories and array of procedures are futile diversions? Are we still in need of that watershed breakthrough or that new interpretation, that when discovered, will shift our acuities toward more intelligent directions? This question may be the paper's crucial one, and if it is, are we more like medieval mendicant beggars than any of us want to imagine? I have a disturbing vision of ourselves holding out tin cups for a few coins and waiting for the Renaissance.

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